



# Healthy Church

## Session Four: Church Membership

### THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

When the International Mission Board trains new church planters, they give them this definition of church membership:

“The members consist only of people who give credible evidence of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who have been baptized as believers. Biblical church members are committed to one another, to assemble faithfully together with one another, and to be the body of Christ to one another.”

Church membership begins when an individual comes to personal, saving faith in Christ and obediently follows the Lord in believer's baptism. Membership can also begin when a believer leaves one local church to connect in life and ministry with another Bible-believing congregation.

A commitment to a local church empowers believers to love one another in community, worship together regularly, and share their gifts for the good of the body.

### TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

Philippians 2:1-4; Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Corinthians 12:24-27

### THE MAIN IDEA

Church membership is the purposeful commitment of individual Christ-followers to a local body of believers. They are connected through unity, love, and shared purpose. These believers assemble regularly and use their individual gifts to serve the larger body of Christ and the world in cooperative ministry.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

*Why is church membership important?*

### SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

**Philippians 2:1-4** How could we begin to list all the benefits of life with Christ? In Him we receive salvation, encouragement, comfort, love, community with the Holy Spirit, and connection with God's people. The natural response is to pour out the love we have so generously received in service to God and others. Church membership is the way we connect with a local body of believers for the purpose of worship, community, and service.

**Hebrews 10:24-25** Early Christians experienced a radical shift as they experienced new life in Christ. No longer separated from God by sin or requirements of the law, they enjoyed new freedom to approach His throne with confidence. Believers should prioritize coming together regularly to worship, study, and serve in community with Christ and one another.

**1 Corinthians 12:24-27** The church a complex and beautiful body of individuals, who retain their diversity but serve collaboratively with their various gifts. Just as we need all the parts of our human body to function in tandem, the church needs each individual member serving from their giftedness in ministry to Christ and His people.



## START HERE

How do you view church membership? Do you view it as a vital way to be a part of life with Christ or as an outdated idea? How does church membership impact the church's shared purpose and ministry? We will explore these questions as we look at three New Testament passages on the importance of following Christ in a local body of believers.

## DISCUSS

*Is church membership an outdated concept or is it still important today? Why?*

## REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

### 1. Church membership demonstrates our commitment to one another.

*Philippians 2:1-4: If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.*

#### *Unpacking Philippians 2:1-4*

Imagine a high schooler desires to be on the school basketball team. He buys workout gear in the school's colors; he practices at home in the driveway every day after school; and he even goes to all the practices. Except, rather than participating, he sits in the bleachers watching the rest of the team warm up, run drills, and rehearse plays. Regardless of the level of talent and color-coordinating gear he wore, the rest of the players would hardly consider him a part of the team. They might appreciate his enthusiasm, like him personally, and even think he's a skillful player. At the end of the day, however, if he wants to play basketball, he must join the team and get in the game.

Church members are more than just fans of the worship, the preaching, or the youth group. Church members have connected their lives and gifts with a particular body of local believers to do life and ministry together. The ensuing community, love, and service that flows from their connection is how others see the love of Christ lived out.

The apostle Paul authored the book of Philippians in approximately 61 AD, during his imprisonment in Rome. The church at Philippi, established during his second missionary journey, sent a monetary gift to Paul through a member, Epaphroditus, and Paul wrote this letter to express his gratitude and to encourage this group of believers.

In chapter one, Paul shared his love and concern for the church in Philippi and assured them his suffering was a tool God used to spread the gospel throughout Rome. He shared how God used



his testimony to bring members of the palace guard into the faith and expressed his confidence that should he die for his faith, it would be a worthwhile sacrifice (Philippians 1:12-13,20). He ended the chapter by encouraging these believers to “live [their lives] worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). Paul recognized he would likely die in prison, but he did not want his death to deter them from their mission.

Paul began chapter two by reminding the believers of the inexplicable gifts they had received through Christ—encouragement, comfort, love, tenderness, and compassion. He desired to see these gifts lived out in their congregation through like-minded fellowship, love, and unity. Paul didn’t look to a day sometime in the future when the believers would have sufficient growth and could begin to serve the body; he envisioned a group of growing disciples who pursued like-minded fellowship, love, and unity even as their faith grew and matured.

Have you received any love, fellowship, affection, or mercy from Christ and His people? Paul would say, “Then give it away!” Like Paul, what “[makes our] joy complete” (Philippians 2:2) is not the acquisition of knowledge, love, or mercy but sharing these with God’s people. Unfortunately, some believers in churches today falsely believe they cannot contribute to the church effectively. Certainly, some areas of ministry require additional knowledge or experience to lead, and believers occasionally need to receive ministry and be fed for a season. However, if we routinely disqualify ourselves for service in the body of Christ, we are missing God’s design and intention for the church.

Psalm 100:2 says, “Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.” When we use our gifts, imperfect as they may be, to serve the Lord and His people, we participate in the joy Paul desired for the Philippian church.

One of the privileges of church membership is participation in ministry. In verse 2, we see a picture of a growing, serving church. Paul described the congregation as a group of believers committed to mutual love and service. Paul encouraged the Philippians toward four commitments as a body:

**Mutual love (v. 2).** The church should be the one place on earth that we come closest to experiencing the love of Jesus this side of heaven. First John 4:7 says, “Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” Because God is love, His followers should be known for the life-giving and edifying way they love one another. Love ought to be the hallmark of every congregation.

**United in spirit and purpose (v. 2).** Church membership is an opportunity for a group of believers to orient themselves around a shared theology. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:4-6, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” A church may be known for many things—great music, a terrific youth group, ample parking—and those things are great, but the unifying factor of biblical congregations is their shared spirit and purpose in Christ. A local congregation can have the biggest impact for Christ



when its members are clear on theology and united on mission to love one another and reach the world for Christ.

**Serve with humility (v. 3).** Humility is one of Christ's primary traits but is not always emulated by His people. Paul highlighted Christ's humility in leaving heaven, taking on the form of man, and becoming obedient to death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8). Paul said believers should "adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus" (v. 5).

**Look to the interests of others (v. 4).** A healthy church is one where members look after the welfare of one another. It is natural to look after our own interests. A healthy church, however, is marked by members able to see beyond their personal preferences to make room for others to encounter Christ.

## DISCUSS

- Look back at Philippians 2:1-2. When has Christ shown you encouragement, consolation, affection, or mercy through the ministry of a local church?
- What does it look like to "serve the Lord with gladness" (Psalm 100:2)? How can sitting on the sidelines of a church keep someone from experiencing the fullness of joy God intends?
- What does looking to the interests of others look like in your personal life, family, small group, or church right now?

## 2. Church membership gives us accountability to assemble regularly with one another.

Hebrews 10:24-25: *And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.*

### *Unpacking Hebrews 10:24-25*

Ask any mom or dad of young children and they will tell you—getting kids up, fed, dressed, and out the door before church on Sunday morning is harder than any other day of the week. Then, add the kids getting into a spat in the backseat or the frustration over a forgotten diaper bag, and it's just about enough to turn the car around and go home.

Gathering weekly with other believers is challenging at times. In our busy lives, the temptation is to sacrifice weekly church attendance in pursuit of other things, even rest. The book of Hebrews, written in the first century to Jewish believers, demonstrates the supremacy of Christ, but also highlights the incredible privilege it is to worship God in unity with other Christians.



Imagine for a moment you were a first century Jewish convert to Christianity. Your entire life you traveled to the temple with your family for the various festivals and sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament. Yet, what happens inside the temple is shrouded in mystery. Based on your gender, ethnicity, health status, or family of origin, you would have worshiped God from a distance, separated from entering His presence. You heard a rumor that when Christ died on the cross, the temple veil, the physical barrier between the priests and God's presence, was torn in two (Matthew 27:51), and now followers of Jesus are saying there is a new freedom to enter God's presence through Christ.

Consider the joy. These Jewish believers entered a new covenant with God through Christ. These people who had worshiped God their entire lives through a series of sacrifices and systems now enjoyed the freedom to experience God up close and personal! The writer of Hebrews spent much of chapter ten explaining how Christ fulfilled the law so they we can experience the kingdom of heaven. You might imagine these early believers would have joined in worship in the temple and in their homes with newfound enthusiasm. Many did. However, as the author reminds them in verses 24-25, they were not to become complacent in doing life and ministry with one another.

In verse 24, we are told what we *should* do—provoke, or spur on, one another toward “love and good works.” The word “provoke,” *paroxysmos*, means to incite, or prod someone into positive action. Some translations use the word “spur” to describe the kind of gentle prodding meant to encourage one another to continue in “love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24).

You have probably heard it said that there are no “Lone Ranger” Christians, although there is ample evidence that many attempt to live this way. Trying to walk with Jesus alone is lonely and largely ineffectual. Without the gentle prodding of other believers toward a life of obedience to Christ, our natural tendency is to drift into complacency, missing the love and good deeds that flow from a life spent in Christian community.

Even though these Jewish Christians addressed in the book of Hebrews had experienced the seismic shift from the law to the New Covenant, they were still tempted to neglect corporate worship. This is why the author reminded them in Hebrews 10:25: “not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” Apparently, some of these converts used the security of living under grace as an excuse to neglect Christian life in community.

In his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard writes, “The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other. Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual of course has a unique and direct relationship with God, and God alone is his or her Lord and Judge. But The Life is one that



requires some regular and profound conjunction with others to share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the benefits of gathering as a body of believers is the opportunity to remind one another of the certainty of Christ’s return and the urgency of sharing His love with others. Hebrews 10:25 says we should encourage each other “all the more” as we await Christ’s return. When one member of the body is hurting, grieving, or suffering, it is the privilege and responsibility of other believers to remind them this world is not our home, and Jesus is preparing a better place for us in eternity. When suffering temporarily dampens our ability to see and hear from God, the faith and encouragement of other believers carries us along.

## DISCUSS

- *What are some things in our current culture and pace of life that make it challenging to maintain our commitment to a local church body?*
- *What vital aspects of life in Christ do we miss out on without Christian community?*
- *When has someone encouraged you in your faith as you struggled? How does being a part of a church family help us see and respond to other people’s needs?*

### 3. Church membership allows us to be the body of Christ to one another.

1 Corinthians 12:24b-27: *Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other. So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it.*

#### *Unpacking 1 Corinthians 12:24b-27*

It is easy to compare ourselves to other believers, worrying that we don’t measure up. In Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle wrote a corrective letter to the church, helping to give clarity to some theological misunderstandings and to encourage them to live holy lives even in a sinful and decadent city.

One misunderstanding centered around spiritual gifts and service in the church. Paul wanted to correct their thinking about what is valuable in Christ’s church.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).





In the beginning of chapter twelve, Paul outlined the role of spiritual gifts in the church. “Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different activities, but the same God works all of them in each person. A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7) From these verses we see two important truths about gifts in the church:

**Different gifts from One gift giver.** God distributes different gifts to different members within the body. These gifts are given for different purposes and ministries, but they all come from the Holy Spirit. Verse 7 indicates that every believer has at least one spiritual gift.

**Spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of ministering to God’s people.** They are not for self-promotion or hierarchy. They are not indicators of someone’s spiritual maturity. Spiritual gifts are given by grace and intended for use in building up the body. While gifts are given individually, their purpose is to be used corporately.

In verses 8-10, Paul outlined some of the gifts of the Spirit. This is not an exhaustive list from Scripture; you can find more examples in Romans 12; Ephesians 4; and 1 Peter 4:10-11. As you might notice, these gifts are all outward-focused, meant for service to God’s people. Each person receives as the Spirit of God wills for the good of the church.

## ADDING CLARITY

Paul named nine gifts of the Spirit. Their use is compared to the functioning of the various parts of the human body for the good of the whole. All believers have been “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). The same Spirit brings refreshment and unity to the whole body. Paul emphasized the unity of the church expressed in variety. As chaos would take over in the human body if each part tried to do the work of other parts, so problems will break out in the church unless each member makes his or her proper contribution for the good of the whole.

In Mark Dever’s book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, he says, “The New Testament clearly shows that our following Jesus is supposed to involve care and concern for each other. That is part of what it means to be a Christian. And though we do it imperfectly, we should be committed to building each other up, and, in doing so, building up the church.”<sup>2</sup> As the Spirit gives us gifts, we use them to build up and encourage the body, becoming good stewards of this portion of our inheritance in Christ Jesus.

In verses 12-24, Paul described the working of spiritual gifts as parts of a body working in tandem. In a healthy church, members work together, using the various gifts God has given, for the good of the body and the advance of the gospel. When believers fail to connect with a local church, they lose the opportunity to steward the gifts God has given in this way, and the local church loses access to the gifts that individual could contribute.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 166-167.



This passage ends with a proclamation: You belong in the body. Or as Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it” (v. 27). Isn’t that great news? In a world where so many people feel they don’t belong, Scripture says that in Christ’s church you have giftedness, purpose, and connection. When you join a local church, you plug into the life-giving ministry of God’s people serving for God’s glory.

## DISCUSS

- *Why might jealousy arise where spiritual gifts are concerned? Why do we esteem some gifts as more valuable? How does the Bible refute this?*
- *Think of some roles in the church that are often undervalued. How do these roles fulfill the mission of the church just as much as more “glamorous” roles?*
- *How could you dedicate the gifts God has given you back to His service in a real, tangible way. What would need to shift for you to connect to serving His church in a meaningful way?*

## GOSPEL FOCUS

At Jesus’s death on the cross for our sins, the temple veil was torn in two from top to bottom, removing the separation that stood between God and His people. Today, we can come to Him in confidence not through our own merit but by the grace and mercy of Christ. The life-giving, life-changing gospel is not meant to be hidden away. Instead, God gave us the local church so we could gather to worship Him and to invite others into fellowship with God. The local church is better with all its members. When you commit yourself to a local church, you bring your worship, talents, service, and gifts into the greater purpose of making Christ known in your community and beyond.

## REFLECT ON THE TEXT

## DISCUSS

- *Why do you think it is important for people to be members of the church before serving in positions of teaching or leading? What does church membership imply about shared values?*
- *What makes it hard to maintain regular church attendance? Does your family have a rhythm or commitment that prioritizes gathering with God’s people each week? If not, how could you establish this?*
- *How does today’s teaching help you see the purpose of spiritual gifts in the life of the individual and the church?*





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## RESPOND TO THE TEXT

A healthy church is one where a local group of believers assemble regularly for the purpose of worship, study, fellowship, and service. They use their gifts in service to one another. Church membership is the starting point of connecting with a local body. Is there a way you or your family need to connect with this body of believers in a new or deeper way?

## APPLY

Have you prioritized church membership and regular church attendance? Is there something in your schedule that needs to shift to make space for a deeper connection with God's people? How might the church benefit from the specific ways God has gifted you?

## REFERENCES

*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Dever, 2021.  
*The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard, 1988.